



SKATING *on* WILD ICE

The joy of gliding along frozen lakes, reservoirs, ponds, and sloughs.



BY LINNEA SCHROEER

SOARING HIGH A figure skater performs an athletic jump off ideal wild ice on Whitefish Lake.

PHOTO BY NOAH COUSER

In early December 2020, like so many other people around the world, I was feeling lonely and sad. The COVID pandemic was in full swing, and for the first time in years my far-flung family had not gathered for Thanksgiving at my house in Bozeman. I missed them terribly, especially my elderly parents. I put up Christmas decorations to brighten my mood, but it wasn't working. Mike, my partner, was moping, too. We needed something new and different to lift our spirits.

Then one day while scrolling through Facebook, I saw posts of people ice skating at Quake Lake, formed in 1959 after a landslide impounded part of the upper Madison River. Photos and videos showed otherworldly images of people gliding past the lake's 60-year-old dead trees sticking up through ice as clear and flat as glass. Now *that* would be something different!

The next weekend I dug out my old figure skates and Mike grabbed his hockey skates, and we headed south along the Madison

Valley. At the lake, we were surprised and delighted by the festive scene. Several dozen people had gathered to enjoy ideal skating conditions of smooth, thick ice, and be out in the open winter air. Groups of people were skating, playing hockey, and sitting in chairs on the ice sharing hot drinks and snacks. Strangers greeted each other warmly and invited others to share in their circle. I was entranced.

The night before had brought a skiff of snow, so the lovely clear ice was covered but

still glass-smooth underneath. We carved figure-eights around the ghost trees and admired the designs our skates made in the thin snow. Mike had an extra hockey stick, and we had fun passing a puck back and forth. After a while, we headed out beyond the trees onto the open ice and reveled in the feelings of freedom and escape. We explored pressure ridges and exchanged awed expressions over the varying sounds the ice made—deep booms, cracking, groaning, pinging, and, at times, even whispering.

Growing up in the Midwest, I had been on frozen ponds before, but this was by far the deepest body of water I'd ever skated across. My heart beat faster and faster the farther we got from shore. Mike is an experienced ice skater and an expert judge of ice conditions—he used to run sled dogs on frozen rivers in Alaska—so the logical part of my brain knew I was safe. But the reptile part kept reminding me there was only about

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6 inches of ice between me and 100 feet of very cold water. To be extra safe, I skated exactly in Mike's tracks, figuring that if the ice held him, it would definitely hold me.

Toward the end of the day, we saw a man gliding by using long, easy strides on skates with long, straight blades and a free heel. His skates looked different from anything we had

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seen before, so we hailed him and he stopped to chat. He said he was wearing Nordic skates, and demonstrated how they attached to his cross-country ski boots with ski bindings. He raved about how comfortable and stable they were, and urged us to get some.

GOING ALL IN

Never one to dally, Mike went out the following Monday and bought us Nordic blades and bindings to go with the cross-country ski boots we already owned. We started following the Facebook group MT Ice Buds, and over the next several weeks began meeting other ice enthusiasts wherever skaters reported good conditions—cold temperatures that created hard, smooth ice topped with little or no snow. We spent most of our time on Canyon Ferry Reservoir and Hauser and Holter lakes, but also skated on Ennis Lake, the Helena Regulating Reservoir, and local ponds in Bozeman and Three Forks. One memorable weekend we covered more than 40 miles on Canyon Ferry alone, skating around Cemetery Island and exploring the western shore for miles. Ice Buds from across the state reported great skating conditions throughout much of Montana that winter.

Skating so much, we got serious about



SMOOTH GLIDING Top: Skaters wearing Nordic skates skim across Canyon Ferry. Center: Ice formations. Right: A skater practices using ice claws. Worn around the neck, the studded dowels help a skater pull herself out of open water if she falls through thin ice.



safety. We watched online videos about reading ice conditions and self-rescue techniques. We bought ice claws: spikes set in big dowels you wear around your neck and use to haul yourself out of the water and onto the ice if you fall in. Mike made us custom ice pikes: poles with sharpened, weighted ends we

used to help judge ice thickness (you can also use hatchets or drills). We carried backpacks filled with throw ropes, a fire-starter kit, extra dry clothes, towels, food, and water.

The most valuable safety lessons we learned came from accompanying skaters with experience on Montana lake ice. They

LONGTIME WINTER PASTIME Wild-ice skating has a long tradition in northern Europe and, with the arrival of immigrants, the United States.

"CENTRAL PARK, WINTER—THE SKATING POND," BY CHARLES PARSONS, 1862.





READY TO NAIL IT A young figure skater sets up for a jump at sunset on Whitefish Lake. When conditions are right, wild ice can be as smooth as an Olympic skating rink. During some years—like the legendary winter of 2020-21—entire lakes and reservoirs freeze solid with no snow or undulations on top, allowing skaters to glide for miles.

PHOTO BY NOAH COUSER



HE SHOOTS, HE SCORES! Above: Playing pond hockey at Cutler Lake near Gardiner. Below: From January 1 through late February, Bannack State Park offers skate rental, semi-groomed pond skating, a rinkside fire for roasting marshmallows, and hot chocolate, coffee, and cider in the warming house.



PAIR SKATING Above: Skaters soak up the winter sun on a frozen wetland near Whitefish. Even when covered with some snow, ponds and lakes can provide good skating if the ice is smooth beneath and at least 4 inches thick.

welcomed us along and showed us various hazards we needed to avoid. That's the great thing about the ice-skating community: Everywhere you go you'll find wonderful people eager to coach beginners, watch out for each other's safety, and have fun together on the ice.

Ice skating isn't like hunting, fishing, or many other types of outdoor recreation, where other people can seem irked that your participation might detract from their experience or success. Sure, there are those who want wild-ice solitude and seek out areas



with no one else around, but for most skaters we've met, being part of a growing community adds to the enjoyment.

EUROPEAN TRADITION

Ice skating has long been a social activity. The first skates were invented in northern Europe several thousand years ago to make it easier

to cross frozen bodies of water. But by the 15th century, skating had become a popular winter pastime. Paintings from the 1800s show happy scenes of older couples skating arm in arm, children pulling each other in sleds, and raucous teens racing through crowds—all painted in the soft light of a northern midwinter day. The Netherlands

has long been famous for its inordinate supply of world-class speed skaters, as the country's plentiful canals are perfectly suited for ice skating. Skating was also popular elsewhere in northern Europe and in the British Isles, and immigrants from there brought their love of skating to North America.

Longtime skater Hope Harper, a fixture on Helena-area wild ice, grew up in Lennep, Montana, in the 1970s, skating on frozen beaver ponds, Voldseth Reservoir, and the Musselshell and Smith rivers. The whole community would come out to skate, she says, because it was something that nearly everyone could do outdoors during winter. Skating is low impact—unless you fall—so it's a great sport for all ages. It's also free, after a minor investment in skates and related gear.

Harper adds that because ice conditions change daily or even hourly, skating requires an attentiveness to weather, wind, temperature, and other aspects of nature. "Every time I go out, I learn something new," she says.

Which, for anyone dreading the monotony of Montana's long winters, is an enticement all its own. 🐾

ICE, GOOD. WATER, BAD.

Longtime wild-ice skater Jim Barnes of Big Sky Cycling in Helena offers the following safety advice:

- ▶ Always skate with a companion if you are a beginner.
- ▶ Always carry ice claws (picks) outside of your clothing where they can be easily reached.
- ▶ Carry a throw rope with loops so someone in the water can easily grab it with cold wet hands.
- ▶ Carry a tool to check ice thickness such as a hatchet, drill, or ice pike. What is considered safe depends on several factors, but as a rule of thumb don't venture out on ice less than 4 inches thick. Clear ice (often called black ice) is denser and therefore safer than cloudy ice, which has lots of air bubbles. Thickness can vary greatly across a lake, so check often as you explore new ice. Look for changes in color, cracks, and texture.
- ▶ If you do fall in, kick your legs vigorously like you're swimming and get horizontal. That will make it easier to haul yourself onto the ice with your ice claws.
- ▶ If you encounter thin ice, turn around and go back the way you came, because that ice supported you previously.
- ▶ If you get wet, dry off and get warm as soon as possible. Always carry a dry pack towel, a change of warm clothes, and the means to start a fire.



Approach with caution!

Early season ice in November and December is almost always the best for skating. New ice is denser, smoother, and more uniform, with fewer seams and ridges. But ice can also be dangerously thin that time of year, so be sure to check thickness before lacing up.

Montana may not be the first place people think of for ice skating, but it is steadily gaining in popularity.

FROM TOP: CAROL POLICH; MONTANA STATE PARKS

FROM TOP: CHUCK HANEY; VIKTOR VRBOVSKY/ENGBRETSON UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY